

# Human happiness and Learning

1983

Introduction:

Dare I say, " I am happy to be here"!

Relate a conversation of last night with my 14 year old son.

David: What do you think happiness is?

An adverb...or is it an adjective?

No, I meant what is it...not its grammar.

Um...It's getting a A in geometry!

Is it the same as feeling good...is it a feeling of pleasure?

Yes, I think so.

Well, can you be happy when you are in pain?

( I was thinking of an athlete whose team has just won even though he hurt his leg)

Yes.

Well, then it is not exactly the same as pleasure...

David: Happiness is having accomplished something!

He reached the same conclusion in a few minutes that philosophers have reached after!years of thought.

I tonight first give a summary of some of the main conclusions of philosophers through out history

II then apply those conclusions to the concrete situation of learning...and study at university.

## Human Happiness and Learning

I. Aristotle ( 384-322 BC) <sup>at the beginning</sup> in the Nicomachean Ethics made the following reflection:

- a. Most people agree that the highest good is happiness, " but when it comes to defining what happiness is, they disagree."
- b. Some people think it is pleasure, others wealth, and others honour.
- c. Even the same person may think it is different at different times. " When he is sick he thinks it is health, and when he is poor he says it is wealth."

II. Aristotle then proceeded to study the nature of happiness:

- a. He concluded that happiness was the goal of all of our actions.
- b. After much consideration he concluded that happiness <sup>followed from the life</sup> ~~involved the activity of virtue. ( good conscious )~~
- c. practiced over a lifetime
  - " We must add ' in a complete life', for one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one sunny day; similarly one day or a short time does not make a man happy."
- d. when his theory was filled out, it became evident that for Aristotle happiness came as a result of a continuous exercise of the activities which were highest in human life: thinking and acting.
  - 1. human learning became the indispensable tool for achieving happiness
  - 2. we had to reflect on who we are
  - 3. and how we ought to act
  - 4. and we carried this wisdom through in our daily life over several years, we would indeed be happy.

III. Boethius ( 480-524), 800 years after Aristotle carried further historical reflections on happiness. while he waited his execution in prison. His thoughts were contained in a short text entitled The Consolation of Philosophy.

- a. Aristotle had believed that happiness demanded a basic minimum of the good things in life, such as wealth, good health, friends, etc. Boethius, who found all of these things taken away by unjust rulers wanted to know whether happiness was still possible.
- b. Boethius uses the symbolic figure of Lady Philosophy to teach him about happiness.

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A [ She says: " I find your self-pity hard to bear when you moan childishly over the loss of some of your happiness. No one is so completely happy that he does not have to endure some loss...The man who enjoys great wealth may be scorned for his low birth; the man who is honored for his noble family may be oppressed by such poverty that he would rather be unknown. Someone else may enjoy both wealth and social position, but be miserable because he is not married. Still another may be happily married but have no children to inherit his fortune. Others have children only to be saddened by their vices. Therefore, no one is entirely satisfied with his lot; each finds something lacking, or something which gives pain. "

- c. She then concludes: " Why then do men look outside themselves for happiness which is within?"

Lady philosophy leads Boethius through complicated arguments to prove that happiness can not be found in a life of pleasures, seeking for riches, fame, or power.

Instead it follows from a life which involves the highest exercise of reason, and freedom of will.

These aspects of human identity remain even though all external goods are taken away.

IV. If we move forward in time another 1500 years to the nineteenth century we find another philosopher considering the same issue. Leo Tolstoy in his autobiography entitled Life offers the following insight into the meaning of human life:

"The meaning of life is revealed in the consciousness of man as striving after happiness. The elucidation of this happiness, the more complete definition of it, constitutes the chief aim and work of the life of all mankind, and because this labor is difficult, that is to say, not a play-thing, but toil, men come to the conclusion that the definition of this happiness cannot be found in that place where it is situated, that is to say, in the rational consciousness of man, and that, therefore, it is necessary to seek it everywhere."

a. Although Tolstoy was such a different person from either Aristotle or Boethius, he agreed with them both that happiness was what we seek, and that we often look outside ourselves for it, instead of within.

b. Tolstoy also brought out the further insight that it is hard work to find for ourselves real happiness. Indeed, it is toil.

c. As many of you may know Tolstoy gave up his wealthy possessions, and large family, to live in simplicity and to die in simplicity. Here we have a third progression from Aristotle's view that these external goods were important for happiness, to Boethius' view that one can be happy even if these goods were taken away, to Tolstoy's view that happiness comes when these goods are given away.

IV. While most of us would not choose this radical witness to happiness, it does happen at times that life's circumstances force such a choice on us (as it did with Boethius). I would like to choose one final example of a philosophical approach to the question to happiness from our own century, before I turn to the second question of how learning will help us to achieve happiness.

a. Viktor Frankl was interned in Auschwitz during WWII as a physician. He lost his wife and family, and yet in that terrible situation he developed a philosophy of life which he later described as Logotherapy.

b. Writing in Mans' Search for Meaning Frankl stated, that ~~max~~ the basic human drive is not for happiness, but rather for meaning. "The ~~striving~~ to find *or two fulfillment of instincts*



meaning is the primary motivational force in man."

c. Frankl developed his theory by interviewing people who survived the concentration camps. He found that they gave meaning to their life in one of three ways:

1. By wanting to complete a work
2. By wanting to experience a value ( such as love)
3. By transcending suffering.

d. Frankl then applied this theory to people living today. He concluded that people can find meaning in their lives by work, love, or transcendence of suffering.

1. While it may appear that we have gone full circle.

Aristotle-Boethius who said that happiness does not come from things outside us, but from within;;;;;to Frankl who seems to say that happiness comes from once more going outside

2. However, this is not a circle at the same depth. For Arist. and Boethius are correct that if our identity is tied up in what is given to us, money or fame, etc then we will be vulnerable to the disappearance of these things...by theft or scandal.
3. Frankl would agree, but he realizes further that it is in giving ourselves to something beyond us that happiness comes ( not by dwelling on the self) .....this is what Tolstoy discovered in his choice of poverty amidst wealth.
4. so happiness is related to how we actively give meaning to our life.

e. Frankl goes further and he suggested in a lecture given in Montreal two years ago, that we can not directly seek happiness, like the carrot before the donkey it always moves ahead....like water on the road in a hot summer day.

1. instead happiness, follows the discovery of meaning...it comes as an unexpected gift.
2. play the tape.

3. only human beings, with rational consciousness, can give this meaning.

VI. How does this reflection on the nature of happiness relate to our practical lives, in the specific context of mature students studying at Concordia?

a. Mature students: people who for various reasons have

interrupted their studies and return at a later date.

b. Two basic reasons:

1. utility - to find appropriate work )
2. for its own sake- the pure pleasure of learning. ) *against value*

take each group in turn....

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1. utility: again two groups

- a. women and men who wish to upgrade their skills to get a better job
- b. women who wish to return to work after bringing up small children. *only for name*

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In both cases, choosing the right kinds of courses, precisely those which will develop skills, the person has a better chance to find satisfying work.

Return to Frankl's point...if able to engage in constructive work, then can ~~find meaning~~ give meaning to your life...then will, as a result be living with a continual source of happiness.

It is precisely this view of work which Pope John Paul II has stressed in his recent encyclical On Human Work

" Work is a good thing for us----a good thing for our humanity---because through work we not only transform nature, adapting it to our own needs, but we also achieve fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, become more of a human being."

*we in a way lose ourselves in work - only to find ourselves.*

2. for its own sake-

two groups :

- a. retired women and men who seek just to study and learn
- b. women and men of independent means, who seek to enrich their knowledge.

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perhaps everyone has a memory of an afternoon or evening when they became so engrossed in a book they were reading that they lost all sense of time.

- a. mine was Lost Horizon by James Hilton which I read around 13 or 14.
- b. looking ~~on~~ back on these moments we would describe them as full and happy.

- c. ~~Aristotle believed that the happiest person was one who was completely caught up in contemplation of the good.~~ This joy just in the activity of thought can also be considered as an experience of happiness...a kind of union with truth. *The loss of self - leads to finding of self*

- d. and just like the experience of falling in love, these moments sneak up on us unexpectedly. ~~and~~
- e. They also require a great deal of preparation and hard work.

- 1. first we had to learn the alphabet, then how to spell, then grammar, and next how to read.

- 2. Tolstoy referred to the fact that life's challenges required much toil.

- 3. ~~In conclusion, I would just like to say that~~

John Paul repeated this in his encyclical when he said: " All work, whether manual or intellectual, is inevitably linked with toil."

- 4. In ~~conclusion~~, then I would have to agree that human happiness, if it is to occur, will come after we have ~~for~~ found an important way to give meaning to our lives, and that the search for meaning demands a lot of hard work or toil.

~~some of which can be found in the exciting prospect of selecting appropriate courses and programmes as a mature student~~

I would also want to add, that the Mature Students programme at Concordia is one pathway to this goal.

The highest gift of human life = human reason - therefore, the proper exercise of the reason is a source of human fulfillment